

GOOD SEED ON STONY PLACES

Matthew 13:5-6, 20-21

Let me begin with three stories that illustrate the intention of our text.

First, there's Sarah, who accepted Christ at an early age, with the influence of her Christian parents, God-centered home-life, and evangelistic-minded church family. If you had known Sarah in those days, you would have been easily impressed with this young girl's sincerity, sensitivity, and seriousness toward the things of God. And in the years after her baptism at nine-years-old, she seemed to be on the right track and well on her way to becoming a strong Christian woman. However, a dramatic change took place during her junior year of high school. I don't know if it was peer pressure, overactive hormones, or the desire to be accepted. But all of a sudden, the things of God that had meant so much to her were no longer "cool." No, she didn't fall into a decadent life of sex, drugs, and alcohol. But by the time Sarah finished high school, she was also finished with Christ and the church. Some twenty-five years removed from high school, she still claimed to be saved. She still didn't pray, read the Bible, or attend church. But she would tell you that didn't matter. She accepted Christ at an early age. At least, that's what her obituary said.

And then there's William, whose father was a pastor. However, William – unlike Sarah – showed no interest in spiritual things as a young man. He did the church thing only out of respect for his father. But as soon as college liberated him from his father's house, he vowed no to go to church anymore. And he made good on that promise for better than fifteen years. And he would have continued his abstinence from church permanently, had his wife not convinced him that their children needed to be exposed to moral and religious instruction. And when he finally returned to church, the lingering affects of his upbringing caused him to respond immediately and enthusiastically. And it wasn't about his children anymore. It was for him. He accepted the gospel, joined the church, and was baptized. And over the next fifteen years, that congregation had no better member than Will. And, ironically, he has a very special concern in his heart for the pastor and his family. And he did everything he could to assist them. From mowing the lawn to teaching Sunday School to counting the money to driving the van to chairing the deacon board; if his pastor needed it, Will was his man. So you can imagine the shock, pain, and anger Will felt when members of the board began to actively fight for the pastor's removal. It was nasty. Things were said and done that shouldn't ever take place in church. And Will's love for the church, position as chairman, and desire to defend his pastor's good name landed him right in the crossfire. And he was scarred. So much so that he left the church and, for the second time in his life, vowed not to go back to church again. And he kept this second vow of abstinence from church for better than fifteen years. And he would have kept it permanently, had it not been for his wife and children making him go to church again. This time, Will was in a casket.

Finally, let me tell you about Janet. Unlike Sarah and Will, Janet didn't have a religious upbringing. In fact, she was twenty-seven years old when she got her first Bible. Janet was beautiful, talented, educated, successful, and confident – which made it all the more difficult for her to understand why she wasn't married by now. And after her dreams of meeting Mr. Right kept turning into nightmares, she knew something had to change. And when she read in a magazine that the way to be the right person is to become the right person, she decided the best way to become the right person was to get God in her life. So she went to church, joined, got baptized, became active, and grew quickly. And the leaders soon noticed what none of the men she dated had apparently

noticed: Janet had a lot going for her. So she found herself bombarded with requests to serve on various ministries. And she could never find it in herself to say no. It wasn't like she had much else going on in her life. But ten years later, Janet began to struggle with the fact that she didn't have a man in her life. She had a lot going on in her life, but the fact that she wasn't married left the void that nothing else could seem to fill. Then, finally, she met Mr. Right! He was everything she was looking for, even though he was already married. How would her church respond to this? She knew. So Janet found herself doing something she had never done before: she turned down opportunities to serve. And not only did she slowly stop serving, but she also stopped attending. Finally, she was so entrenched in the joy and shame of this relationship; she left the church for good. Oh, she visited churches every now and then. But for all practical purposes, she was done with Christ. Her married man was meeting a need that Christ could not.

These stories are all fictional. However, any similarity between these characters and real life persons or events is absolutely intentional. Sarah, William, Janet, and many people just like them, all share some important things in common: They heard the gospel. They received Christ. And they gave evidence of genuine faith. But, at some point or another, they all fell away. And the fact that their faith did not last raises a question: Did they go to heaven? I believe the biblical answer is no. However, I do not believe they missed heaven because they lost their salvation somewhere along the way. The Bible clearly teaches that true believers are eternally secure. However, scripture also connects eternal security with what is called "THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS." It means that people who are saved will continue to trust, worship, and obey Christ until they die. And if they fail to persevere, it does not mean that they lost their salvation. Rather, it proves that they were never really saved in the first place. **DR. JOEL GREGORY** puts it this way: "The faith that fizzles before the finish had a fatal flaw from the first."

And that's the point Jesus is making in our text when he speaks of seed falling on stony ground. Notice 13:5-6. "Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away." According to 13:10-17, Jesus intentionally spoke to the crowds in this parabolic fashion so that the unbelievers could not understand and be held accountable for more truth. But he later interpreted this parable of the sower for his disciples. And 13:20-21 says: "But he who receives the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arise because of the word, immediately he stumbles." This description and explanation of stony ground helps us to understand how the heart responds to God's word. And the point of the lesson is this: Some people do not respond to God's word because their profession of faith is superficial. So let's walk through these verses to see what good seed on stony ground teaches us about superficial faith.

I. STONY GROUND APPEARS TO BE FERTILE.

In 13:18-23, where Jesus comments on this parable of the sower, he tells us that the seed represents the word of the kingdom. And he also tells us that the different soils represent the various heart conditions of people who hear God's word. First of all, there

is what he calls “the wayside.” It’s the strip of soil where people cutting across the field have beaten it into a hardened path. So when seed falls by the wayside, it never breaks ground. It just sits on the surface of the soil until the birds come and devour it. Now, the wayside and the stony ground are virtually in the same condition. The only difference is that hardness of the wayside is clear, obvious, and in plain view; while the hardness in the stony ground is hidden. Because there is a thin layer of soil covering up the underlying bedrock, the stony ground appears to be fertile. In fact, unlike the wayside, the seed may even sprout on stony ground. And it may sprout so quickly that the undiscerning observer would erroneously conclude that this section of the field will bear the most, best, and greatest fruit. Alas, what the undiscerning observer does not know – but will inevitably find out – is that there is a great difference between the appearance of the surface and the reality underneath. And that’s the way it is with superficial faith.

My most consistent prayer for Shiloh Church is that every member would be truly saved. And even though I pray this regularly, the awkwardness I feel in making that petition has never diminished. I guess that’s because there’s something within me that doggedly holds on to the natural but unbiblical assumption that a religious person is the same thing as a Christian person. But that’s just not true. And passages like this parable of the sower challenge us to be just as vigilant in praying for the lost people in the church, as we are in praying for the lost people who refuse to come to church. While our hearts break for the hardhearted people who will not respond to the word, we need to ask God to break our hearts for the seemingly, apparently, or outwardly responsive people who have not experienced a change underneath the skin. The external condition does not matter if the condition of the heart is not changed. It’s like three frogs sitting on a log. Two of them decide to jump into the water. Now, how many frogs are on the log? If your answer is one, you’re wrong. There are still three frogs on the log. Yet, our instincts may lead us to answer one, because we confuse a decision with true change. But the fact is that making a decision does not put the frogs in the water. Unless or until they actually jump, they will remain on the log, no matter how many decisions they make. And that’s the way it is with saving faith.

- Responding to the message is just a decision.
- Walking the aisle is just a decision.
- Praying a prayer is just a decision.
- Filling out a card is just a decision.
- Joining the church is just a decision.
- Getting baptized is just a decision.
- Serving in a ministry is just a decision.

All of these things are just decisions. And they will not get you into the kingdom of heaven any more than the frogs’ decision to jump off of a log will put them in the water. Now, I’m not discounting the decisions I’ve mentioned. But I am saying that all of these decisions are fruitless if your heart is not changed. Mark it down: Just as apparently fertile soil can cover the reality of stony ground, superficial faith can mask a hard heart that has not made a true commitment to God’s Word, God’s Son, or God’s kingdom. In **Matthew 7:21-23**, Jesus says: “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say

to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name.’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’”

II. STONY GROUND HAS NO ROOTS.

13:20 says: “But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy.” Everything seems great. But then the first line of 13:21 states the problem: “Yet he has no root in himself.” With the wayside, the problem is that the seed could not get in. But with the stony places, the problem is that although the seed got in, it could not get down. And so while new life seemed to be sprouting forth, it would inevitably be aborted, because the underlying bedrock prevented the seed from establishing strong and deep roots in truly fertile soil. And this root problem of the stony ground is Jesus’ explanation for why many sincere, committed, and devout people do not persevere in the faith. Here is why people fall away. Here is why people backslide. Here is why people apostatize. They do not have any roots in themselves. Now, when Jesus speaks of the person who has no roots in himself, he means the same thing he did in 13:19, where he speaks of the seed being sown in the heart. He is talking here about the condition of people’s hearts. Therefore, if some people have hearts like stony places, it means that a person can receive the word in their hearts, without it actually taking hold of the heart. How is that? Well, note that when Scripture uses the word “heart” as a metaphor it refers to seat of personhood. That is, it represents the mind, the will, and the emotions. So for the word to take root in the heart, it must lay hold of the mind, the will and the emotions. This leads us to a greater understanding of superficial faith.

13:20 says, “But he who receive seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy.” Don’t miss that. He receives it with joy, gladness, and enthusiasm. In other words, his emotions have been gripped by the word. And the passion he feels toward Christ is so strong that he immediately begins to sprout forth signs of life. However, Jesus says that he has no root in himself. Wait a minute. Jesus doesn’t say that he has shallow roots, or weak roots, or insufficient roots. He says the hearer has no roots, because the mind and the will remain unaffected. This is a warning against what **DR. R.C. SPROUL** calls “Sensual Christianity.” You see, strong feelings, spiritual passion, and even supernatural experiences are not enough to grow and sustain saving faith. If you do not allow the word to sanctify the mind and surrender the will as well as stir the emotions, your life will never experience the fruit of saving faith. Mark it down: You need to let the word of God take root in your mind, your will, and your emotions. How are your roots? In **Ephesians 3:17-19**, Paul prays “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height – to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.” And **Colossians 2:6-7** says: “And you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving.”

Let me put a footnote here.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we must be very careful to make sure that people in our sphere of influence do not have superficial faith because we have only given them a superficial message. We must strive to live up to Paul's evangelistic standards recorded in **1 Corinthians 1:22-24**: "For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. A large historic, metropolitan church inscribed the words of **1 Corinthians 1:22** on the outside wall of their building. "WE PREACH CHRIST CRUCIFIED," it read. But over time, ivy began to grow up the wall. And one day the ivy began to cover one of the three words in that statement, so that only the words "WE PREACH CHRIST" were visible. And without that church ever noticing, the ivy kept growing, so that only the words "WE PREACH" were visible. Unfortunately, the external condition of that building has become the internal reality of many churches in our nation. The ivy of sin, fear, doubt, compromise, and materialism have so gripped Christianity in America that we are preaching, but it's not really clear what our message is. But I declare that tickling the soil will not produce fruit. You must plant the seed.

III. STONY GROUND WILL ONE DAY FACE THE HEAT.

The sower scatters his seed. Some fall on stony ground. And because they had no depth of earth and no roots, they immediately sprang up. However, while these sprouts are coming up, the sun is also coming up. Likewise, there will come a time when the superficial believer will have to face the heat. Note the fact that **13:6** says, "When the sun was up..." It does not say, "If the sun comes up." Instead, the text gives us a definite reality. The sun is going to come up. And in the second sentence of **13:21**, Jesus explains this reference to the sun by saying "For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles." Again, it's a definite reality. You are going to face tribulation and persecution because of the word. And **Luke 8:13** adds that there will also be temptations. Isn't it interesting? While many preachers, churches, singers, authors, and televangelists keep trying to convince us that getting into the word will solve all of our problems, Jesus himself says that if you receive the word, the word itself will bring problems into your life. And in **13:21** Jesus is explicit about the fact that he is not just talking about the problems that are normal part of human life in a fallen world. He is talking about problems that come because of the word. If you receive the word, you will have to face the heat. You will have to face the heat of tests, trials, troubles, and temptations.

Mark it down: Every person who receives the word will have to face the heat. **Matthew 16:24-25** reports, "Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.'" **Acts 14:22** reports that Paul and Barnabas returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, "strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, saying, 'We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God.'" **Philippians 1:29** says: "For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for his sake." **2 Timothy 3:12** says: "Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution." **James 1:2-3** go so far as to say, "My brethren, count it all joy

when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience.”

I repeat: Every person who receives the word will have to face the heat. That’s the bad news. Here’s the good news: Satan is not in control of the sun. The rising and setting of the sun is in the sovereign hands of the almighty God. **Matthew 5:45a** says, “He makes His sun to rise on the evil and the good.” In other words, the same God who turns the heat on people who hate him also turns up the heat on those who love him. The difference is that when the sun rises on the stony ground, it scorches the growth; but when it rises on the good ground, it strengthens the growth. So don’t try to escape the heat. Even as the heat of the sun is necessary for growth in the natural world, the tests and trials we go through as believers are necessary for our spiritual growth. Some years ago I read about a group of scientists who were studying the process of caterpillars turning into butterflies. And when the new life was ready to break out of its cocoon, the scientists took their instruments and began to set the butterflies free. All of the butterflies survived the process. But as the scientist thought, none of the new butterflies ever flew. They discovered that it is the process of the butterfly breaking out of the cocoon that gives its wings strength to fly. Likewise, if God were to take away all of the tribulation and persecution we face because of the word, we would never become what he is calling us to in Christ.

IV. STONY GROUND CANNOT SUSTAIN LIFE.

WARREN WIERSBE has well said: “Faith that cannot be tested cannot be trusted.” And that’s the fatal flaw of superficial faith. They, like stony ground, hear the word, receive it with joy, and begin to show signs of life. But when the sun of tribulation and persecution arises in their life, they don’t have the nutrients and nourishment to sustain life. 13:21 describes their demise two ways. First of all, Jesus says that the superficial hearer “endures only for a while.” That phrase “for a while” translates the Greek adjective *proskairos*, which refers to something temporary. It is used only four times in the Greek New Testament. It’s used here and in **Mark 4:17**, a parallel passage. But it’s also used in **2 Corinthians 4:18**, where Paul says: “We do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary (*proskairos*), but the things which are not seen are eternal.” Because the things of this world are temporary, true faith will always stand the test of time. Then the term is used in **Hebrews 11:25**, where we are told that Moses chose to suffer with the children of Israel rather than enjoy the passing (*proskairos*) pleasures of sin. Yes, the pleasures of sin are temporary. Because the pleasures of sin are temporary, true faith will always pass the test of time.

But not only does Jesus tell us that the superficial hearer only endures for a while, but he also says that he “stumbles.” The verb is *scandalizo*, where we get our “scandalize.” It basically means to cause one to stumble or to place an impediment in one’s way. And in the New Testament it’s used to refer to one who is spiritually offended and thus stumbles. Jesus says here that when the superficial hearer faces the heat, they become offended by the word of God and they do not endure. Get that. 13:20 says that the superficial hearer immediately receives the word with joy. But then 13:21 says that when the heat is on, he immediately stumbles. But I submit to you that, if you are going to be saved, you must endure in the word no matter what happens. **Matthew 24:13** says,

“But he who endures to the end shall be saved.” **John 8:31-32** says, “Then Jesus said to these Jews who believed Him, ‘If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.’” **1 Corinthians 15:1-2** says, “Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you – unless you believed in vain.”

If you are going to be saved, you must endure in the word, no matter what happens. But here’s the good news: The steadfast perseverance of the saints is the result of the sovereign preservation of the saints. If you trust him, God will keep you when you can’t keep yourself. He will protect you. He will guide you. He will see you through. **Philippians 1:6** says, “He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.” **1 Peter 1:5** says that we are “kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.” **Jude 1:24-25** says, “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to God our Savior, who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen.”

A certain father was walking with his son through some fields and neighboring pastures. At first the little fellow would hold on to his father’s finger, but he found that when he stepped into a hoof-print or stumbled over something, he would lose his grip and fall in the dirt or snow. He gets up, brushes himself off, and grabs his father’s finger again, gripping harder this time. But, again he would fall. In fact, he fell so often that at one point he stopped and said, “Daddy, rather than me holding your hand, maybe you should hold my hand.” Of course, the father did. And the boy still stumbled, but now his father had him gripped firmly, so that he could not fall.

PRECIOUS LORD, TAKE MY HAND. LEAD ME ON; LET ME STAND.
I AM WEAK, I AM WEARY, AND I AM WORN
THROUGH THE STORM, THROUGH THE NIGHT, LEAD ME ON TO THE LIGHT.
TAKE MY HAND, PRECIOUS LORD, AND LEAD ME HOME.